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ABSTRACT

The problems of shoplifting are increasing in importance and complexity. In the United States, the majority of those apprehended for department-store shoplifting were youths. This paper considers shoplifting in department stores, in supermarkets, on college campuses, etc., in the United States and other countries. The focus is on the psychology of shoplifting and included are specific and general references. (Author)

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PSYCHOLOGY AND THE PROBLEMS OF SHOPLIFTING

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Abstract

The problems of shoplifting are increasing in importance and complexity. In the United States, the majority of those apprehended for department-store shoplifting were youths. This paper considers shoplifting in department stores, in supermarkets, on college campuses, etc., in the United States and other countries. The focus is on the psychology of shoplifting and included are specific and general references. This paper was presented (by a colleague, Frank S. Forbes, J.D.) to the Midwest Section of the American Business Association on April 21, 1972, in St. Louis, Missouri.

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PSYCHOLOGY AND THE PROBLEMS OF SHOPLIFTING

Theories and evaluations abound in the study of delinquency and criminality. In the last few years, more and more time, energy, and money has been spent in diagnosing the problems. Few studies emphasize treatment areas. Psychological studies may be classified as to variables or factors that are biological, personological, familial, and social. There are also general statements which combine two or more of the above variables or factors. At times, there are also "simple and sovereign" statements that attempt to understand the basis for such untoward behavior.

Two recent books of popular interest have been Karl Menninger's *The Crime of Punishment* (1968) and Ramsey Clark's *Crime in America* (1971). A recent book tangentially related to the problems of crime and delinquency is B. F. Skinner's *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (1971).

Shoplifting is one form of stealing or theft, is one form of delinquency or crime, and is the concern of this paper. The focus will be on psychological rather than legal or business considerations.

Studies have been conducted in America and other countries, in department stores, supermarkets, self-service stores, college campuses (bookstores, etc.), and with police and public-prosecutor records.

Michon and Michon (1968) and Brauneck (1970) considered characteristics of crimes (including shoplifting), offenders, and recidivists. Weber (1970) cited a 50% increase during the preceding 5 year period in delinquency for juveniles under 14 years of age, including a 205% increase in shoplifting. The relationship between incidence of shoplifting and reporting is problematic. The problem is compounded because of employee thefts and the vagaries

of inventories. But, the belief is that only a minority of shoplifters are reported and fewer still are prosecuted.

Robin (1964) said that almost 60% of those apprehended for department-store shoplifting were under 18 years of age, characterized by a low-average of stolen goods, and were working in groups. Sixty-three per cent of those shoplifters were apprehended between 2 and 5 PM, and there was a consistent and large increase in shoplifting from September to December. Amateurs far outnumber professionals but the latter present special problems with regard to repetition, frequency, and detection.

In supermarket shoplifting, according to a national commission set up by Congress (*NCCD News*, 1966), a profile pattern was established. The apprehended shoplifter was 18 to 29 years old and accounted for 25% (the largest subgroup) of the thefts. Drug items and sundries were more popular than food, the total worth about $3.75 (this would be higher today), and usually taken on Thursday, Friday, or Saturday between 3 and 6 P.M.

Motives for shoplifting according to Jarosch and Muller (1968) may be divided into 3 groups: Planned, prompted by the situations, and psychopathological. Jarosch (1968) also stated that apart from planned shoplifting, special situations and advertisements may induce such behavior in labile persons. Tocchio (1962) classified the professional, the amateur, the narcotic addict, and the kleptomaniac. An increase in drug addiction, especially narcotic addiction, further heightens the problem. In a customer-oriented society, shoplifting may always be a problem, but, hopefully a lesser one.

Of customers selected at random for shadowing (*Security Gaz.*, 1970), 1 in 12 "lifted" something. The same publication mentioned other studies that had ratios of 1 in 20, and 1 in 10. Astor (1969) mentioned shoplifting

ratios in customers of 1 in 8.5 and 1 in 10. If the customers had not been followed perhaps the ratios would have been higher. When caught, Cox (1968) said that the most common defense for shoplifting included some aspect of absentmindedness.

A differential sex effect has been both posited and negated. In the Netherlands (Hilbers, 1967), shoplifting is the only crime in which female offenders outnumber males. Females with depression, or during menstruation, pregnancy, and menopause have been both implicated and exonerated in different studies. Jarosch (1968) and Mey (1966) mentioned the prevalence of male shoplifters among youths, and female shoplifters among adults. Mrowka (1966) stated that it is frequent among female minors and, according to Ochmann, less frequent among female majors. Robin (1964) said that female predilection for shoplifting compared to males has been overestimated. Sohier (1969) cited studies in various countries showing a trend toward equal numbers of men and women. The hypothesis that shoplifting is a typically female offense has not been well verified. The ratio of female shoppers to male shoppers is an important aspect. In other words, consider not only female versus male shoplifters, but number of female shoplifters to female customers, and number of male shoplifters to male customers.

Psychological, psychiatric, and psychoanalytic reasons have also been given for shoplifting. Psychiatric symptomatology, e.g., depressiveness was implicated, especially for women (Badonnel, 1968). Studies in France appear to emphasize this. But are the depressive feelings cause or effect? Many women would feel sad after being caught. Shoplifting has also been related to persons with some psychiatric syndromes (Badonnel, 1968; Merrick, 1970). By definition, these persons have difficulties in many personal-

social areas of functioning. Is shoplifting specifically related to their disorders? Essentially, with kleptomania, and with narcotic (opium derivatives) addiction in our culture, there is a specific tie-in. In the former instance (Bousquet, 1969), the true kleptomaniacs (usually women) are generally in a satisfactory financial position, compulsively steal unneeded objects, often of the same kind, and after being caught a few times, readily confess. In the latter instance (Tocchio, 1962), the narcotic addict steals to sustain his expensive addiction.

Tegel (1964) discussed women, and raised the question whether shoplifting is a specific womanly indication, i.e., related to womanly nature (environmental sensitivity, passivity, biology, etc.). Merrick (1970) considered women and matrimonial stress, unfulfilled emotional needs, loneliness, and complexes. Mrowka (1963, 1966) said that youthful female offenders were opportunist, not in need of the product, showing off, under the influence of experienced peers, and needing to experience the unusual. When questioned, the young females talked about a desire for smartness in looks. Mrowka saw their behavior as having the character of infantile passionate acts possibly related to cyclic influences (new in town, lonely, menstruating, etc.). As in the biology section (differential sex effect) the personology section focuses on females in shoplifting. This is typical of the studies reported in the literature, primarily by men. We can imagine what women liberationists would have to say about this. With the exception of kleptomaniacs and opium-derivative addicts, the vagaries of the evaluations are overwhelming. Sampling and probability come into question time and again.

Though family variables and factors are mentioned often in delinquency and crime, they are not mentioned as causative or correlative

agents in shoplifting. In other words, the family constellation has not seemed to be a basic consideration in the professional literature on shoplifting, at least to date. When such data are included, they are descriptive or demographic.

Social reasons are given as being intimately related to shoplifting. Some are stated in the negative form and also add to our knowledge. For example, Robin (1964) stated that a large majority of shoplifting cannot be explained in terms of poverty. The national commission on food marketing set up by Congress (*NCCD News*, 1966) noted that rarely were persons unable to pay for the supermarket goods that they had stolen. Won and Yamamoto (1968) said that shoplifting was numerically and proportinately a middle income phenomenon (determined by discussion with the offenders, etc.). Adversity and financial problems, in general, had little to do with shoplifting (Merrick, 1970). The open-display counter, the self-service system, and the higher cost of living have been considered temptations. With regard to campus shoplifting (Mapes, 1968), male and female, high and low grade, and undergraduate and graduate students, were proportionally represented. Again, lack of money was rarely a motive. Observers speak of alienation or rebellion, moral decline, the student considering it a game, etc. The same interpetive trends may be connoted for a significant minority of high school and junior high school students shoplifting in department stores. Another problem is that of the lower-lower class (often called dyssocial by the American Psychiatric Association) wherein the crime is not in stealing, shoplifting, etc., but in getting caught. Oh Decalogue where are yuu?

Most of the studies cited above deal with the psychological diagnosis

of shoplifting. Few studies in the literature deal with the psychological treatment of shoplifters, with two notable exceptions: 1) kleptomaniacs (directly related to shoplifting), and 2) opium derivative addicts (indirectly related to shoplifting). The latter steal, rob, assault, and use many other criminal techniques to obtain goods or money to support their expensive addicitons. The treatment consists in controlling or eliminating their addictions so that there will be no need to steal, etc. As an aside, New York City is alleged to include about half of the heroin addicts in America.

Though most studies focus on diagnosis, many at least tangentially give recommendations as to prevention. Ideally, the area of prevention should be focused upon. How do we prevent shoplifting?

The notion of deterrents is a critical one. With regard to the psychology literature, Versele (1969) said that a prison sentence was liable to aggravate the personality and probation with its supervision and rehabilitation guidance was preferable. The books by Clark (1971) and Menninger (1968) did not present prison nor probation as currently viable treatment techniques. Probation in this country, generally, does not have much supervision nor much rehabilitation guidance. Mrowka (1963) suggested a "reflection punishment" (detention or work in a hospital, etc.) as valuable. Cox (1968) said that severe punishment did not seem to be a deterrent and that monetary penalties may prove to be the most effective. Tocchio (1962) advised vigorous measures against shoplifting, and Merrick (1970) advocated prosecution and public exposure.

But the problem of deterrents was compounded since there was reluctance on the part of stores to prosecute shoplifters (*Law and Order*, 1964). Griffin (1967) discussed the belief of companies that active control

would drive the customers away. Fortunately, the business attitudes just cited are changing. Some form of prosecution is necessary, though the quality and quantity of prosecution may be open to question.

The notion of control-procedures is a critical one. With regard to the psychology literature, suggestions are given as to control (Aromaa, Tornudd, & Wartiovaara, 1970; Bennett, 1968; Mey, 1966; Tegel, 1962). There are also training handbooks available on prevention of shoplifting, e.g., Rogers (1970).

Past theories and evaluations with regard to psychology and the problems of shoplifting have been cumulated in *Psychological Abstracts*, *Excerpta Medica: Psychiatry*, *Abstracts for Social Workers*, *Sociological Abstracts*, and *Abstracts on Criminology and Penology*. Other helpful bibliographies appear occasionally, e.g., Spencer (1971). Present and future psychological research may be more helpful in an attempt to control shoplifters and shoplifting.

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